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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000716

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ETRD EU SR

SUBJECT: IS THE EU TIRING OF SERBIA?

Classified by Ambassador Michael Polt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (c) Summary: Despite a constant stream of pro-Serbian rhetoric from both European capitals and the EU itself, from the Belgrade perspective some in the machinery of the EU seem to feel Europe is getting tired of handholding its perennial "problem child." The view from the EU bureaucracy in Belgrade is increasingly that Europe is willing to continue to move forward on things that are easy to accomplish - minor adjustments to visa regimes and restarting SAA talks - but is losing its willingness to drag Serbia into the EU absent indications that Serbia truly wants to join and is willing to do the work necessary to get there. In the meantime, a Serbia surrounded by EU members and serious aspirants may be increasingly bypassed as businesses find ways to work around what is becoming a European anachronism. End summary.

¶2. (c) Following the formation of the "Spring Coalition" government in Serbia on May 15, EU Enlargement Commissioner Ollie Rehn visited Belgrade May 16 to engage with President Tadic and PM Kostunica. Press coverage of Rehn's remarks, and concurrent reactions from European capitals on the formation of the government painted a picture in local media of an EU eager to re-engage with Serbia on integration. The announcement of the conclusion of a relatively minor visa facilitation agreement added to the public feel-good mood following Rehn's visit (despite the German ambassador's private dismissal of the agreement as "window dressing").

¶3. (c) Local EU rep Peter Sorensen briefed emboffs on the results of Rehn's visit on May 17, but his assessment painted relations between the EU and Serbia in much more muted shades. Sorensen confirmed that in his meetings with both Tadic and Kostunica, Rehn had reiterated his three conditions for restarting SAA talks: formation of a new, democratic government; a declaration by that government of its commitment to fully cooperate with the ICTY; and concrete action to do so. The first two, he said, could be considered done - Tadic called for Mladic's arrest on May 16, and Kostunica reiterated ICTY cooperation as a plank in his governmental platform on May 15. Concrete action by the government, though, is not yet in evidence, and has not been since Kostunica unveiled his now largely discredited "action plan" in summer, 2006.

¶4. (c) Nevertheless, Sorensen said Rehn has been very forward leaning in meetings throughout Europe about wanting to get SAA talks restarted. He added that Rehn is also eager to pry control of who defines cooperation away from chief ICTY prosecutor Carla del Ponte and back in the EU's hands. Sorensen said the "concrete action" requirement is more of a fig leaf to cover Rehn's previous statements, and that Rehn will likely look for a way to broadly interpret anything (e.g., the creation of the Serbian NSC) as concrete action and thus pave the way to restart SAA talks. Rehn's view, he said, is that restarting talks is a no-cost way to bolster the new government and encourage additional steps - postponement has had as much effect as it is going to.

¶5. (c) Getting eventually to SAA signature, though, will be extremely hard without real movement on PIFWCs, Sorensen predicted. It will require a consensus among EU members to put Serbia back on an accession track. Despite the positive statements from European

capitals in recent days, the Rehn visit, and the conclusion of the visa facilitation agreement, Sorensen said the EU is simply losing patience with, and interest in, dealing with Serbia. He noted that Rehn had come to Belgrade without any serious preparation - he had not even been briefed on the new government's platform, and thus had little to engage on except to deliver his points on restarting SAA - the visit seemed somewhat pro-forma.

¶6. (c) Sorensen noted that the EU bureaucracy is increasingly focusing on other, more institutional issues. Now that a new Constitution may be in the works, he says the EU bureaucracy is "90%" focused on that - mostly for parochial reasons, because it impacts jobs for EU bureaucrats. In this environment, he said the EU doesn't have time or energy to devote to coaxing Serbia into the fold. Even absent bureaucratic disinterest, there are still many in Europe who question Serbia's credentials on European values, he said, largely because of outstanding war crimes issues. Serbia's turn as head of the CoE raised a brief but spirited opposition from among European human rights groups that noted Serbia's failure to come to terms with the PIFWC issue.

¶7. (c) In such an environment, Sorensen said the mood of many in the EU machinery toward Serbia is one of exasperation - the institution is tiring of trying to drag Serbia kicking and screaming into Europe. The election of a Radical Party leader to be Speaker of the Serbian parliament with the full cooperation of the Prime Minister's putatively democratic-oriented party provided a further disincentive to many in the EU for working to bring Serbia closer to Europe. Sorensen said Kostunica is routinely criticized as anti-democratic in internal EU reporting now, further dampening enthusiasm to integrate Serbia into the EU in the foreseeable future.

¶8. (c) Sorensen said increasingly the impression is that the EU is washing its hands of Serbia somewhat - having finally come to terms

BELGRADE 00000716 002 OF 002

with the fact that Serbia is just too difficult, they've decided to find work-arounds. His most telling example of Europe's willingness to leave Serbia to its fate was the astounding change in cargo transit routes through the Balkans in the year since Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU. He said people in the Serbian transport sector tell him long-haul transit traffic is already down a whopping 36-40 percent from last year - mostly because truckers are now going through Romania and Bulgaria, which even with worse roads shaves 4 days off transit times (and toll and transit charges) compared to going through Serbia because of fewer border and paperwork delays. Sorensen noted that in 1-2 years, there will be passably good North-South highway networks flanking Serbia on either side, making the primary "corridor 10" route through Serbia far less relevant in the greater European scheme of things. Bottom line, he said, it shows Europe is finding a way to live without Serbia.

¶9. (c) Comment: This is only one conversation with one EU bureaucrat - though one who has been working the Serbia beat for some time and has a good sense of the mood in the bureaucracy. It appears as though Europe is still willing to do what is easy to remain on friendly terms with Serbia, and to profess a willingness to integrate Serbia into the EU. But with so many bigger issues on the EU's plate, with some in Europe opposing expansion on institutional grounds or opposing Serbia on moral grounds, and with the business community finding workable alternatives to Balkan economic integration, Serbia risks falling farther behind the rest of Europe as it holds on to nationalistic positions on ICTY and Kosovo.

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